

## Promising Practice: Occupational Training Cohorts

### Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County

#### Health Careers for All

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The Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County (WDC) includes the purchase of specific occupational training cohorts at community and technical colleges as one training component in its Health Careers for All (HCA) project, supported by a Health Profession Opportunity Grant (HPOG) from the Office of Family Assistance. WDC has found that using grant funds to support this type of strategy allows HCA to effectively engage its partners, particularly employer and education partners: funding lowers the risk of testing new strategies, and the cohort provides a concrete opportunity to partner rather than a generalized and sometimes unclear invitation to “work together.” At the same time, WDC is able to “learn by doing” and create a case for sustaining those practices that are effective.

As one example, WDC is using HPOG funds to bring employer and education partners together to address a common gap in the career pathway between NA-C (Nursing Assistant Certified) and LPN/RN (Licensed Practical Nurse/Registered Nurse). HCA designed a cohort for entry-level incumbent healthcare workers that packages all of the prerequisite coursework required for entry to the Associates Degree in Nursing (ADN) program, along with the ADN program itself. The cohort will run for approximately three and a half years, including both the prerequisite and ADN phases of training.

Two challenges that employer partners have expressed with regard to supporting entry-level incumbents to pursue additional training that qualifies them for higher-level positions are **funding** and **scheduling**. In this case WDC is using HPOG funds to pay for the cohort, covering all tuition, fees, books, and supplies for the entirety of the training. This practice has effectively eliminated the funding barrier in the near term and allowed the program to focus considerable effort on scheduling challenges, both working with the college to regularize/create greater predictability in the academic schedule and working directly with employer partners to explore/troubleshoot challenges they face internally.

Internal employer challenges include backfilling/arranging for coverage while student employees are in class, supporting reduced schedules that accommodate training, maintaining full-time-equivalent (FTE) levels that allow students to retain critical benefits, exploring mobility within the organization where possible (e.g., supporting changes in position/schedule/FTE to accommodate training), and managing staff morale issues that may stem from perceived preferential treatment for employees in the cohort. Because WDC is working with a diverse group of employers, including both larger healthcare organizations and smaller community health clinics, its employer partners experience those challenges and opportunities to varying degrees.

The cohort includes the following specific design elements:

- Packaging of prerequisite (prereq) coursework to increase efficiency of moving through the prereq phase: This phase can be complex because some prereq courses are actually prerequisites for others, courses fill up if students don’t register early enough, etc.

- Regularized schedule to address logistical challenges for both incumbent workers and their employers related to school schedule changing each quarter: At least through the prereq phase, students are on campus Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays 2:00 – 5:00 p.m. (plus online work and Saturday review as noted below).
- Hybrid campus-based and online instruction: Face-to-face instruction is critical with the level of academic rigor, but the hybrid approach allows for reduced time on campus/away from work.
- Review sessions/tutoring built into the model: The jump in academic rigor between NA- C and prereqs/nursing curriculum is considerable, and individuals who are working often don't have as much time available to study. (Saturday review sessions are built into the model and are mandatory, creating formal time for review and study.)
- Use of cohort approach to leverage peer support: The cohort approach allows for customized design elements like those described above as well as strong peer support, which together have a strong positive effect on retention.
- Campus-based coordinator/single point of contact for the cohort: This resource person can streamline and assist with registration, financial aid, academic issues, etc.

## **Promising Practice: The Navigator Model**

### **Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County**

The navigator model is a promising practice that is gaining traction throughout the community and in several different service environments. The Workforce Development Council of Seattle–King County uses HPOG-funded navigators to work across education, workforce, and social services systems to promote integrated case management and services at the individual level. Navigators help participants access information and resources to support good planning and successful outcomes, including packaging support resources across systems for individual success and improving how existing systems to work together.

Many in the HPOG target population are individuals with limited resources, limited academic histories, and possibly limited English language skills. In order to engage in the educational system and succeed in career progression, these students typically need many resources. Some of these resources are available through the educational system, some through the social services system, and others from other systems. This network of systems is a complicated and complex web for students in the program to understand and navigate. Students may get off track because of a need they have that they can't determine how to meet or because they haven't made a plan to address meeting that need. Navigators provide assistance with these matters but also help students to develop the skills necessary to navigate these systems independently and to develop and refine their own action plans for success. At its core, the navigator's job is to link between and within systems and industries in order to help the individual succeed along all steps in his or her career path and become more self-sufficient.

One key consideration in establishing a navigator program is recruiting the right people to serve as navigators. This role is different from case management because the navigator should understand more intimately the multiple systems with which their clients need to interact. This intimate understanding really requires seasoned professionals who have knowledge-based relationships with key people and organizations to develop expertise in various subject areas.

In this grantee's model, all navigators are employed by one agency, procured through a competitive process. Navigators in the Seattle program meet biweekly as a team with their director. Several of the HPOG navigators have gone through healthcare training programs themselves or have had previous experience working as navigators in the healthcare sector. For organizations seeking service providers, it is imperative to first map out what is needed from these providers, such as knowledge across systems, knowledge of the industry, and the ability to engage in career planning.

Another important consideration is determining the extent to which navigators will be able to handle all the necessary tasks as the caseload grows. It may be necessary to adapt and modify the initial navigator model so that it continues functioning efficiently and effectively once the caseload grows and there are more demands on navigators' time. Participants may be engaged with their navigators for an average of three years, which means participants are part of the navigator caseload for a protracted time.

For those considering developing a navigator model, the grantee recommends researching and investigating the various navigator models that can be employed. For example, some navigators are employed by a Workforce Development Council or Workforce Investment Board. Some community colleges have utilized navigators in a more limited way. Also, there are other HPOG grantees, such as San Diego and Edmonds Community College that also use navigator models.

At the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County, navigators provide step-by-step support for program participants as described below:

1. A prospective student entering the HPOG program meets first with the navigator. The student may be referred from various sources, such as TANF or WorkSource, for example.
2. The navigator determines the student's eligibility to participate in the program, conducts a background check of the student, and utilizes assessment tools to determine if a healthcare career is a good fit for the student applicant.
3. The navigator begins career planning with the student. CASAS scores are reviewed. Students are asked to conduct some research individually about the variety of healthcare careers that may be open to them. The navigator is critical to helping students understand the parameters that exist around particular career choices, such as which courses are required, how much time is necessary to complete the course of study, what pay scale is typical, and where training for specific career choices is offered. One of the tools this grantee utilizes in some of the career planning activities with students is a training packet developed in King County through the Workforce Investment Act program.
4. The navigator helps the student to determine the next steps in the educational journey. Throughout the engagement with the student, the navigator provides information regarding training opportunities.
5. The navigator assists the student with linking to necessary training, helping the student enroll in the proper school for the particular career choice, covering transportation costs if necessary, and coordinating with other agencies like TANF to provide additional support services.
6. Navigators meet regularly with students and, in the case of HPOG-funded training cohorts, establish specific times when they can be found on campus. They can assist students with budgeting, financial planning, and linking with support services such as housing and fuel cards.
7. Navigators may assist with registration for certification or licensing exams and are able to assist with fees as necessary.
8. Navigators support job search, with the assistance of an HPOG-funded job developer, and continue contact with students once they have secured employment to support job retention. Navigators also assist with return-to-training for incumbent workers.